

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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Testimony of Alyson Baker
In support of: Senate Bill Number 530

The Commerce Committee

Honorable Chairmen, Members of the Committee, I am Alyson Baker, executive director of The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, and I'm here today to testify in support of Senate Bill Number 530, An Act Concerning Funding for the Consortium of Connecticut Art Museums.

I am proud to advocate for the Committee's support for this exciting partnership of the seven leading independent art museums in the state of Connecticut. Our institutions, all accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, present the apex of artistic practice in a wide range of mediums in nationally and internationally acclaimed exhibitions and collections, and are an irreplaceable economic and educational resource for our state, as well as an important tourist attraction.

An investment in these museums represents an investment in the cultural life of Connecticut, the education of our children, and the advancement of our economy.

Next year, The Aldrich will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary with special exhibitions, programs and events highlighting its remarkable history and its integral place in the landscape of our community. The museum was founded by Larry Aldrich on Ridgefield's historic Main Street in order to present the most relevant, significant and innovative art of the day, a mission that has made the museum an internationally recognized leader in the field and a cherished part of our region's identity. The Aldrich is one of the few independent, non-collecting contemporary art museums in the United States and the only museum in Connecticut devoted to contemporary art.

We believe that direct interaction with the art of our time, and artists of all disciplines, can inspire and nurture new and revolutionary ideas that lead to transformative learning experiences for all ages. The Aldrich's gallery-based education programs ensure that students in grades K-12 receive the benefit of a strong arts component in their curriculum through innovative programs aimed at honing twenty first-century critical thinking skills, both in and out of the classroom. In 2012, we helped 6,500 school visitors connect to our world through contemporary art. Another 3,500 children, joined by their families, took part in weekend hands-on workshops and in our artist-led summer camps.

In the past four years, the Museum's school audience has comprised students from thirteen districts and 26 schools, with 50% in elementary grades, followed by approximately 21% middle, and 29% high school students. We ensure that underserved urban schools in Bridgeport, Danbury, Norwalk, Stamford, and Waterbury are able to receive the benefits of arts education at The Aldrich by providing transportation and participation funding for their students, who receive passes which enable them to bring their entire families on a free Aldrich visit.

The Aldrich's programs teach the critical thinking skills necessary to connect artistic practice to other disciplines and elements in school curricula, and to enable students to better relate to the world around them as they derive meaning from visual subject matter. Besides the Museum's expert educators and curators, both emerging and nationally recognized exhibiting artists are an important factor in our education vision, helping to provide children with the kind of intensive arts experience not available in most public school art classes and exposing them and their teachers to new ideas and artistic processes. The exhibiting artists also lead gallery tours of their work, offer advice at seminars to those regional artists who would follow in their footsteps, and teach hands-on skills at workshops for adults.

In addition, The Aldrich is currently taking the lead in addressing the evolving needs of educators, allowing them to leverage the content-rich resources available at the Museum to support inquiry-based learning as mandated by Connecticut's newly adopted Common Core State Standards in English language arts.

The Aldrich caters directly to the over one million people who reside within a twenty-mile radius of the Museum, where almost one-third of the local population is of school age. Besides attracting visitors from the rest of the state, our lower-Fairfield County location is convenient to New York City and we target special advertising to our local community and the international art world, helping to promote both Museum visitorship and local tourism to a discriminating audience. Our brochures also direct visitors into Ridgefield center and other towns in our region to enjoy the New England ambiance and discover restaurants, stores, and accommodations after viewing the art.

We believe that the museums whose representatives appear before you today are an essential element of the fabric of life in Connecticut, and your support is essential to our ability to effectively preserve our history, and present our exhibitions and collections, while enhancing our outreach, educational initiatives, and ongoing development of relevant and meaningful programs.

Thank you for your consideration and for the opportunity to speak with you today on this important issue. I ask that you support Senate Bill Number 530.